



# Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

## Disclaimer

This presentation was produced under U.S. Department of Education contract number GS00F115CA with Synergy Enterprises, Inc. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, surface, or enterprise mentioned herein is intended or should be inferred.

**Kaci Morgan:** Welcome, everyone, to podcast four of the Native American Language Resource Center's Summer Series on How to Start an Immersion School. This episode will focus on growing teachers. Today, we are talking with Darren Kipp and Jesse from the Cuts Wood school. And so, Darren, I'll let you go ahead and introduce yourself and then we will have Jesse do the same.

**Darren Kipp:** Oki, Nidoniko, Saquini, Maka. Hello, my name is Lasgun. Hello, my name is Darren Kipp. I'm a part of the Pagan Institute and the Cutswood Blackfoot Language Immersion Program in Browning, Montana, located on the Blackfeet Indian Nation.

**Jesse DesRosier:** I'm Skaapiii Piiikanii, we call ourselves Sparrow people, Southern Sparrow people, Piiikanii. Western colonizers listed as Piegan or Higan. But we're from the great Blackfoot Confederacy, we're one of the four bands of the Blackfoot Confederacy and the only ones residing in the United States. The other three reserves reside in Alberta, Canada. But it's an honor to be a part. I thank you all for allowing me the space and share some words.

**Kaci Morgan:** Thank you both for your time today and those thoughtful introductions. Darren, if you could start out by telling us a little bit about your organization and the work that it does.

**Darren Kipp:** Certainly. Piegan Institute was founded in 1987. It was a result of a community-wide survey that was being conducted with our local Blackfeet Community College and a group of community leaders and overall people that were, how would you say, they were just very concerned that we were seeing our Blackfoot language disappear. And so, in 1985, they did a community-wide survey. In that survey, they found out that the majority of all first language speakers were over the age of 50. And there was a huge gap from 50 down to, you know, age one. And so, just by sitting there and understanding what that revealed, the survey showed that the Blackfoot language was much like every other Native American language. It was slated to disappear if there were no new speakers or teachers created. And so that's where Piegan Institute was founded. It really came out of a



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

community-wide survey that revealed we had to start finding and creating ways to create new speakers of our Blackfoot language or else we were simply going to lose it. And at that time, there was a prediction that by 2015, going kind of looking at the age and the numbers, that we would be down to less than five first language speakers by 2015. And it is 2023 and we are pretty much right there. We have very few first language speakers, but we are in a good position because as a result of the survey, a group of our community members really became very active and started to address the issue. And it just galvanized the community in a good way. You had the public school systems working with the Head Start program, working with the community college, everybody tying together and just saying, you know, we've got to figure out a way to do something. And then out of that came the formation of Piegan Institute as a private 501c3 nonprofit. And just to kind of fill those gaps that those other institutions maybe weren't able to do.

**Kaci Morgan:** Wow, that's incredible. So, really a community movement. And, that's actually been a theme of a lot of the work going on in Indian Country around language revitalization.

**Darren Kipp:** Combined together, that whole idea of collaboration and generosity, creating prosperity, that's what had happened in those early years. And you still have it happening today, where everybody's working together to create that prosperity. And to us, prosperity is our language, speaking our language, creating speakers. So that goes all the way back to the mid-80s. And in 1992, Piegan Institute formed its very first immersion school and it was called the Moccasin Flat School. And it was purposely built in an area in our community that was referred to as Moccasin Flat. So that was very important. And that first group of students that started out going all the way back to in the early 90s, eventually, you know, they grew out of the Moccasin Flat school. And a second school was built. And so we just began to move, you know, with that first group of kids, the program began to expand and then it also began to build buildings to house those students. And from there, it just kind of got the momentum going, if you want to put it in that perspective, and there was really no looking back after that. So right now, Piegan Institute and everything, we just, we refer to everything as the Cuts Wood School. It's, the community refers to it as the Cuts Wood School. And so, we have first grade through eighth grade. And we really try to emphasize and dive into the language.

**Kaci Morgan:** So, speaking of those earlier years. Jesse, Darren told me that you were a student in the earlier days and are now a teacher there, correct?



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

**Jesse DesRosier:** Yeah, so I started attending the Immersion School here in the late 90s, not long after it was created. From the third grade I started here and graduated in the eighth grade around 2002. From there I went on to Browning High School on a reservation where I graduated. From there the military and then college. In 2017 after graduating University of Montana I came back and started working here at the Piegan Institute as well as Blackfeet Community College in 2018. So, I teach at both places currently. But Cuts Wood is truly my home. We say, Piegan Institute is the official name, but I say Cuts Wood a lot because that's another common name for it. So, if there's any confusion, just know that it's the same place, Piegan Institute and Cuts Wood School.

**Kaci Morgan:** That's awesome. What a full circle moment. Talk to me a little bit about the impact of this movement that was starting from the perspective of you as a child learning in your Native language. What was that experience like? What was that impact?

**Jesse DesRosier:** Well, I can remember when I started back here in third grade, you know, a lot of my classmates were already attending the school at least a year before me, some of them a few years, because it originally started as a preschool. And when I started off originally, I felt really behind, you know. And believe it or not, it wasn't the language that drawn me to the school, it was the environment. I could tell it was such a drastic difference of environment compared to the public school system. A lot more community, a lot more one-on-one, and especially there's a lot of love within the environment of teaching and learning, which is something completely different than Western education, you know. But I remember starting out, I was almost feeling like I was in the dark a lot of times because the other students were already responding in the language. The teacher would speak in the language, and they would already respond. And I remember it was like in a dream I had like a faucet turned and some water started to run and when that water started to run these words just start flooding in my brain and when I went to school that next day I could start to pick out what the teacher was saying. Even sometimes when I wouldn't know the translation in English, I would automatically start to figure out okay this is what they're asking of me. And slowly but surely, you know, I started learning more and more and it was like the faucet just continued to flow. And since that time, I've had language in my brain and I think it really unlocked a door deep in my [Native word], in my spirit, you know, connecting me to my ancestors. So, it was a powerful awakening for me at a young age.

**Kaci Morgan:** Yes, I love the idea of an awakening. I think, you know, myself being a second language, speaker of my own language as well, I definitely can relate to kind of that initial, like what is going on. And I think, you know, really the vision, right, as we're talking about



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

starting immersion schools, really is that awakening piece, you know, of course, it's about, learning the language and things like that, but really it's even bigger.

**Jesse DesRosier:** From the way it was explained to me by an elder, our language, and especially our names in the language, that's our umbilical cord to the next world. That allows us the opportunity to connect into the next world of our ancestors. My people have only been speaking English for maybe four or five generations. I have grandfathers on both sides, my fathers and my mothers, who were the first to attend Carlisle Boarding School in 1890. And that was only four, maybe five generations ago. So, we have a lot more history speaking Blackfoot. And I think it's vital for our understanding of identity to tap back into that. You know, to gain any understanding of identity, of self-recognition, of sovereignty, of a cultural understanding, or health, or anything, history, we must tap into our languages. And I explained to my college students, the adult classes, being able to understand any new language is like being able to climb on top of a mountain and get a full 360-degree view of your environment and the geography, topography of everything from a bird's eye view, you know. And being able to learn your own language is the same thing. And I tell everybody, it's so important and so powerful.

**Kaci Morgan:** Absolutely! And, Darren, from your perspective, how was your organization designed for this impact?

**Darren Kipp:** We've been doing this for over 20 years and we know that immersion is not easy to do and it's something that we work towards and we're always working for and I just say that's an incredible challenge but it can be done. And I think one of the guiding principles that you have to have when working towards immersion is you've got to create very good professional development for teachers and for students and for family. I mean, you just have to kind of sit down and really map it out. It goes back to that process of just because you can speak the language doesn't necessarily mean you can teach the language. So that is something that is always a challenge to work with our first language speakers is to bring that teaching mode out. And I have to say there are some really good guiding principles that have been established by the founders that those three folks established way back in 1987. And for us today, we've inherited those rules and we've inherited what those founders started. And so as the next generation that has stepped in to carry on this torch, we really go back to those guiding principles and I really encourage every immersion program that is out there to find some guiding principles that everybody involved can agree upon and use those as your foundation as you move forward because when you have



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

those guiding principles and everybody is collectively involved and understands then a lot of the challenges and everything that comes about can really be addressed in a good way.

**Kaci Morgan:** So, I'm hearing that intentionality around professional development bridging language and pedagogy is critical as well as some foundational work around principles. So, for you all, what are those guiding principles?

**Darren Kipp:** And so, for Piegan Institute, our four guiding principles are this. Number one, never ask permission to accept the stewardship of the Institute's vision to preserve tribal languages. We talk a lot about this with other programs. When you start debating the importance of the work you are doing with others, you will lose your energy. You'll lose your creative edge. You will lose your innovative edge. Debate around native languages is a waste of time for you. So you cannot, and that's why we say rule number two, never debate the merits of the institution's vision to preserve tribal languages. Number three, respect the power of the Blackfoot language. We all know the power of our tribal languages. That is a golden rule. Number four, probably a rule that we all need and it's the most rewarding. Number four is show, don't tell. Don't waste time talking about what should be done. Instead, work hard to accomplish the vision and mission of the work we are doing. Those rules have been incredibly helpful in our professional development as teachers, as administrators, as students, and it has helped guide us through some difficult times because we always go back to those rules.

**Kaci Morgan:** Thank you so much for sharing those. I love how the organization is grounded in those guiding principles and that they're woven into the everyday operations and different planning pieces, including professional development. I think that's very impactful and a good starting point when you're trying to think about what does growing teachers look like here, what does our school culture look like, what are the things that are important to us as a community. You've mentioned a lot about collaboration, and I know you do something super interesting as far as using elder guides as integral parts of the professional development. So, how do you incorporate and honor elders and the community in the development of the language and of the teaching staff?

**Darren Kipp:** The best way that we honor elders in our community, the best way that we have found to honor our elders in our community is just simply to bring them right into the classroom. That is the biggest and most rewarding aspect of teaching the Blackfoot language for us is when you bring in an elder into the classroom with a group of students, there is just an energy synergy that takes place. And just that simple gesture of inviting somebody in, it sounds very simple, and sometimes it may not be. But that gesture alone,





## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

just inviting them in, having a cup of tea, a cup of coffee with the students and just spending some time there in the classroom is a really wonderful way to start to bring in those first language speakers and those elders in the community. Because what ends up creating a nice dynamic that brings out conversation, it brings out words. And then also, it starts to do this, we see this all the time, where children start to ask the elder, well, how do you say this word? How do you say this word? And that is the beginning right there. And a lot of times we know this, a lot of our elders in our native communities are very much an untapped resource. And that is something we have to address in our communities. Finding those elders, finding those resources in our community, and then bringing them in and making them feel that they're part of the movement, if you wanna say that, to save the language.

**Kaci Morgan:** For others that might be listening and might want to bring elders in or bring people from the community into the school more, but aren't really sure where to start, what advice would you give them, or how could you describe where you all started?

**Darren Kipp:** For us, in the early years, the number of elders that you could reach out to, there were many. And as time has gone by, that is, you know, in regards to language, you know, those numbers have become less and less. And I really want to say the best thing to do is to try and identify those folks in your community. That really takes time. I mean, we know who's who in our Native American communities, but that's not what we think we do, I should say. And I'll give you a really good example that we had happen here six years ago. We have always, you know, been a big advocate for speaking and teaching our Blackfoot language. And through conversations with speakers and family and friends, we found out that we had three brothers in our community that were fluent Blackfoot sign language speakers. And it just was like, we have to find these gentlemen and bring them in. And I mean, and that's the example that I can use to you because it was happening in us. We've been open for 20 years. All of a sudden we're like, wait a minute, there's three brothers that speak, or that know sign language? So we went right to them and just said, hey, we need your help. How can we accommodate you? And what can we do? And we really just brought them in and made it fun. You know, not everybody's a teacher, not everybody wants to be a teacher, but we made it fun for them. And I know for a fact that every one of our Native communities, we have people in those communities that know some language skills. You have to find those people. You just have to find them and then you just have to bring them in. And I really encourage everybody to just not take that attitude that, oh, I know everybody in my community, because we had that attitude. And then we just really found out that was the wrong attitude or else we never would have been able to bring Blackfoot sign language into our school.



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

**Kaci Morgan:** Wow, incredibly insightful. So, Jesse, from your perspective as a current teacher, what advice would you give someone who is looking to start teaching in their language?

**Jesse DesRosier:** Well, I would say, you know, for anybody teaching language, I think the ideal setting, especially when we're talking about adult learners, is not only a fluent speaker or a first language speaker, but it's really important to have second language learners, a lot more for explaining some of the concepts. Because the first language speakers are vital. However, their understanding of the language is all from the internal perspective. And second language learners have a great advantage of being able to understand things in both languages. So therefore, their explanations and definitions of words and examples can be a lot more helpful for students. Of course, first language speakers are valuable. But for teachers, don't ever cut yourself short on how much you know. I have often hear people saying, well I'd like to be a teacher, but I don't know enough. I'm not fluent. However, you think about when a child is learning how to speak, we don't all have degrees in English language, right? We don't have degrees in teaching. Children pick up the language just from being around it. So, for any learner of the language, they are able to pass that on. And by being able to teach the language, I think you've reached another level in your language learning process. Your language acquisition really is enhanced from that teaching perspective. So, I would encourage anybody, whether you're a full-time student in the language, if you're a fluent speaker in the language, do your best to pass on what you do know and continue to learn as you go along. You know, don't prohibit yourself from teaching based off of where you should be at or shouldn't be at.

**Jesse DesRosier:** We never stop learning. That's the truth. And one thing that we've always done here at the immersion school, because we do grades from first grade to eighth grade is once the students reach around fifth and sixth grade, we start putting them into leadership positions to where they can pass on knowledge, and you know kind of guide the younger students. Kind of like a mentorship program and that really helps the older students gain a lot more understanding in the language. When they're able to teach the lessons that they've learned, that's when we know they've reached a point of mastering the language. When they're able to perform that as a leader, that's the final step in their language journey is being able to pass it on.

**Kaci Morgan:** Yeah, absolutely. I love the way that you all really use your students' growth and then also the knowledge of elders. I think you all really honor the knowledge in the community. So, when people are, you know, thinking about opening their own immersion



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

school and they're trying to envision what that professional development or support would look like for language teachers, what are some things that you think are important when you're developing a model for that from a teacher's perspective?

**Jesse DesRosier:** Well, you know, Darrell Kipp, our late mentor, really did a great job at giving a blueprint on starting an immersion school. But one thing that we got to keep in mind is treating our language with the most integrity and the highest respect possible. So therefore, in a respectable school, a respectable house, building the most beautiful place you can for language. And when it comes to the language teachers themselves, providing them the most opportunities for success. The incentive should be at the highest level. And the value of our language, I think, is immeasurable. So, when we talk about positions within our community, you know, it's that of a doctor. We are really saving our identity here. And a doctor saves lives. So, we think about how much incentives we give our doctors in our community. That should be about as much as you give your language teachers. Whatever support financially, whether it's through monetary support, whether it's through facilities, whether it's through curriculum or opportunities, give them the most support we can possible. Whether they're in the elder stage or younger generations, teachers of language should have all the opportunities for success, you know. What I see oftentimes in the Western education setting is they list the language teachers as an adjunct class, giving them very minimal financial support, very minimal resources, moving their classrooms around, and that really doesn't set up any program for success. You know, when we talk about the different subjects in Western education, mathematics, science, social studies, every one of those subjects are covered within the language, you know. So, if you're not valuing your teachers of language in the same ways that you are in the other subjects, you're really cutting yourself short. So, I think language teachers should be at the priority of support, you know, providing them with the best support and resources available that you can provide, given not every program has the funding or has the opportunities, but whatever is the most you can support for your teachers, that should be given. And the second support should be really given to the students and the learners of the language, because they are taking on the responsibility of carrying the language on. You know, that is the future.

**Kaci Morgan:** Great points, Jesse. Darren, from a bird's eye view, what would you say are some pitfalls we fall into sometimes when designing professional development or when thinking about how to grow teachers?

**Darren Kipp:** You know, over the decades, we've probably worked with well over 100 different tribal groups. And everyone has this dilemma, if you want to say it that way, or





## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

this challenge. And one of the things, and again, this goes back to one of our founders and father, he had this great saying and we always use it and that is, you know, there's no handbook on how to save your language. You have to figure it out. And that is really to the point. And you do, you have to figure it out. And you have to find ways that work and what we have found out is this – we try not to create competition within the language amongst our students because we're all second language learners now. And as a result, we're all in the same boat now. And so the reality is, is we have to figure out ways that we can learn the language and teach it at the same time. That is incredibly difficult. And then there's this false expectation that you can learn a language relatively quick and simple. But here is the biggest thing we have to really point to. You have to get the hours in. We talk about that all the time within our teaching group. You have to get the hours in. You have to work towards 80 hours. You have to work towards that 200-hour goal. You have to work towards that 1,000-hour goal because that's when the language starts to really click. And as you're taking on that responsibility, that goes back to that rule, respect the power of the Blackfoot language, respect the power of your language. You're not going to learn it through osmosis. That's not going to happen. Everyone, you know, no, you have to put the time in, okay? And once everybody agrees on that and says, yeah, we just have to put the time in, then it becomes a realistic goal. And one of the things we really, really put forward in our approach is we have been doing everything over the past few years on a project-based approach. And that helps our second language teachers develop their language skills at the same time that they're teaching to students.

**Kaci Morgan:** And, what does that project based approach look like for you all in practice?

**Darren Kipp:** What we do is we establish a baseline for each student within a project to set a goal. So, if we have a project, say a flashcard game. And that's another thing, be innovative, be creative, create games, come up with your own ideas. So we sit down, everybody does the baseline, oh man, out of that 40 words in this project, I only know five, okay? And then from there, we're able to set goals. Yeah, I want to get to 20 words in two weeks, I want to get to, you know, all 40 words by three weeks. And so what that does is it sets a goal for yourself, for the student. And so now you're kind of competing against yourself now, okay. And you're not competing against anybody else around you, you're kind of competing within yourself. And what this does is it creates a rapid pace, alright, and everyone loves to challenge themselves, and especially as we're learning language. And that's how it works. And so take that approach of doing things on a project basis as a tool to create your professional development for your teachers. It is empowering because once you're done with a project as a teacher, as an instructor, you realize, all right, I can teach 40



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

words. I can teach these 40 words. I've got a way of doing it. Okay, now I've got a way of teaching these, you know, 15 different phrases. Okay, boom, I'm off and running now. Okay. And that is that big part of that professional development right there. Is you've got to do some projects, you've got to create your own techniques that work for you. And then understand this, I think this is the biggest thing to understand in developing teachers, not everything applies to everybody. The blanket approach that we often take in kind of our approach of education today, that's not a good approach. Some teachers are comfortable doing flashcards, some are not. But you got to work within what works for you. And I think that, again, goes back to administrators being able to not be micromanagers when developing language programs. You will drive yourself crazy, you will be stressed out, you will burn out, you will have no fun teaching and creating new speakers in your language. From an administrative point, if you start micromanaging and you start putting these unrealistic expectations, oh, you should have this, that, that. No, don't do that, because now what you are really doing as an industry, you're creating debate. And that's not your job.

**Kaci Morgan:** Great points. Thank you so much for sharing! That makes me curious as well. What would you say is the job of an administrator in growing their teachers?

**Darren Kipp:** Your job is to empower. And I think that is really something that we have all truly realized here, that the development of teachers and new speakers has to be empowerment. You have to give folks the ability to make mistakes, to fail, and then learn from those failures and move forward. That's the best way to do it. And going back to that old saying, there is no handbook on how to save your language. You are your own individual tribe, you're your own individual group of people. You have your own power, your own insights, your own knowledge base, use it. Because what we're doing here may not technically apply to maybe what's going on in Tuba City, Arizona. Okay? It may not apply at all, okay, to what's going on, say, over in Cherokee Country, all right, or anywhere else. You've got to also realize there is power within your own language, find it. Respect the power of your own language. And honor your language by creating new teaching tools, new approaches. And I really encourage everybody to take an approach to try to be creative, try to be innovative in the way that you teach your language to the next generation. And it's like this, if no one's having fun learning their language, no one's gonna wanna speak it.

**Kaci Morgan:** Beautifully, beautifully put. Jesse and Darren, wado, thank you so much for your time and expertise today! It's been a joy learning from you both. Is there anything either of you would like to add before we close out?



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

**Darren Kipp:** You know, there's one part of our work that has been incredibly successful is not only having our guiding principles to refer back to, but also a concept and an approach that we have fully embraced. And that is create an environment when you're teaching the language, but create that environment like grandmother's house. And there's something that we have always been told by our elders. Create an educational atmosphere that feels like grandmother's house when you're teaching a language. In other words, make it comfortable. All right? If a child is hungry, put some snacks out. There's no reason why you can't have snacks while you're learning your language, right? Again, bringing that attitude, kind of bringing some love and some compassion into the teaching, into the classroom, and some humor. And then that idea, like we always say, treat it like grandmother. Why? Because your grandmother never set you up to fail. They empower us and make us feel healthy, loved, warm, everything, that is the power of grandmother's house. So I really encourage instructors out there, create that kind of environment, you know? Make it something different. Make it almost like, hey, wow, I don't really feel like I'm in school right now. I actually feel like I'm at home learning my language. And there's some real power and beauty in that approach. And one of the things we do every day, okay, and I really encourage organizations to do this. We have shared this with groups all over the world. Do Big Circle every day. Our version of Big Circle is this. We gather in a circle every day and we go over words and phrases that we've been learning and we go over words and phrases that we're going to be learning, okay? And what happens in that time of big circle is this. This is where you start to set grandmother's house in motion. Because what happens in big circle is we're able to get a qualitative and a quantitative assessment of every child. And what that means is that we're sitting there in big circle right now and we say, oh, you know what? Kaci's, she's just not firing on all cylinders today. I don't know what went on at home last night. She's tired. Don't put her in a position of leadership today. Don't put extra pressure on her. Just let her kind of get her day going and over here, he's firing on all cylinders, put him in that leadership role today. By having that qualitative and quantitative assessment time in big circle, there's humor, there's laughter, but also it's a time where the students can help each other with words and everybody comes together. That, again, is much like Grandma's house. So that approach is really important. And that idea of having students help each other and everybody being in it in a collective.

**Kaci Morgan:** Great, I think that was really valuable. Love the idea of grandmother's house. What about you, Jesse, is there anything you'd like to add?



## Podcast Transcript: Growing Teachers Professional Development

**Jesse DesRosier:** Well, I would just encourage everybody, you know, and I don't consider myself a very knowledgeable person. I was fortunate enough to be around really smart and hardworking people, and I picked up a little bit of that, you know, but I'm a lifelong learner of our language and one word of advice I would give everybody interested in learning their language or teaching it or carrying on, P'inimets'kawt'n't'yop'ki'yase'k'aak'y'mo. You know, and really, there's no English definition equivalent to that, but what it essentially means... Don't ever quit. Don't ever give up on your vision, on your dream, on your goals. You know, there's times where you're going to stumble and fall. You get knocked down ten times, get up eleven, you know, carry on. Iqaqimat was a phrase that our warriors used going into battle to defend our territory, our children, and our land base and food source. It meant never quit, never stop, always persevere no matter what. So, when you find your vision, you find your goals, don't quit that path and don't let anything stand in your way. Always persevere. And if you can continue to do that, your life will be good. You know, our lives are like the sun crawling across the sky. It's slow, but as long as you stay true to where you're going, you'll get to the other side.

**Kaci Morgan:** Uwoduhi, beautiful. Wado, thank you. Again, we are so grateful to you both. And thank you to our listeners for joining us for this episode!